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An Interview with President Denise Battles

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An Interview with President Denise Battles

Proceedings of GREAT Day: When did you first attend GREAT Day? What was your favorite thing about it?

President Battles: My first attendance at GREAT Day was last year after I had been identified as incoming president but had not actually started. I arranged a couple of occasions to come to the College in advance of my first day on the job which was July 1, 2015, and I made sure to be here for GREAT Day because I had heard so many wonderful things about it. I am a big believer in students working under the mentorship of faculty and staff to engage in research, scholarship, creative activity, and otherwise explore their academic interests in close collaboration with individuals who have expertise in those areas. I came last April, and I absolutely enjoyed every moment. I had the opportunity to say a few words at one of the events associated with GREAT Day, and I am very much looking forward to this year.

Were you able to observe student work and projects?

Yes. Last year I had the opportunity to sit in on some of the oral presentations. I also participated in the poster session and attended the keynote presentation. So I had a good taste of all the aspects of the day.

How did it feel to see the work students were doing on campus? What kinds of research did you do as an undergraduate?

It was very affirming to see the students applying their studies. By affirming I mean that my impressions about the college were accurate. We have very high caliber students who are performing at a very high level; they are very active, intelligent, and inquisitive. I thought that was the case, but I saw it very well evidenced through my participation in GREAT Day. One of the reasons I found and find the College so appealing is because of the dedication of the faculty and staff and the customized approach they take to assuring that students have every opportunity to explore their academic interests. Being able to witness that process in action very much affirmed that my perceptions were accurate in that regard.

As a student, I was involved in undergraduate research. I went to an institution similar to Geneseo. It was smaller-sized; liberal arts and science were a key focus. As a geology major, I had the opportunity to do undergraduate research under the mentorship of a new faculty member at my institution. Her guidance very impactful for me. She was a high-temperature geochemist in the field of geology. It is probably not a coincidence that I went on to be a high temperature geochemist. I really appreciated the opportunity to learn from her, to work with her.

I was given the opportunity to learn how to utilize a variety of high-tech geochemical instrumentation and was trained and educated on how to use very expensive analytical tools that I do not think I would have had access to in a graduate or research-focused institution. I had experiences that I might not have had in other settings and that helped shaped my desire to pursue my graduate education in geology and ultimately become a faculty member.

Would you say that GREAT Day is an essential part of the Geneseo community?

I think GREAT Day is a truly important aspect of what we do at Geneseo. It encapsulates a lot of what is best about the College in one very rich and full day when you get to see students demonstrate their knowledge and creative abilities, their scholarly work, their research. I think that in the past ten years—because we are about to celebrate our tenth consecutive GREAT Day—GREAT Day has become a strong tradition for Geneseo, and I am delighted that it is an activity that students, faculty, and staff embrace. From year to year, the number of presentations and students participating has steadily risen which indicates just how attractive and appealing the event has become.

Have you seen a similar undergraduate research symposiums at prior universities? What has been your experience with those?

I have seen similar events that focused on undergraduate research, but the fact that Geneseo dedicates a full day to focus on research, scholarly and creative activity makes it different from the settings I have been in before. Elsewhere, such events are an element, an add-on evening kind of thing; that we provide members of the campus community the opportunity to present *and* to attend is something that is distinctive compared to the settings I have been in.

How do you think GREAT Day helps Geneseo as an academic institution? Why is it important?

I think from a student perspective it can be a unique capstone kind of experience. It is one thing to engage in the research, scholarly work, or creative activity under the mentorship of an expert in the field; it's another thing to pull that all together in a professional setting to deliver a performance, a talk, or a poster. It allows students to pull together all of their educational experiences to work on a problem and present it to individuals in a way that actively engages the observer. It enables the student participants to field questions and provide answers from GREAT Day visitors and to perhaps think about the work that they have done in new and different ways.

What do you like to do on your spare time?

I am a geologist, so I like being outdoors and hiking and touring national parks. I love reading; **laughter** I wish I had a little bit more time to engage in that. I have a dog, Texas Lucy, who fortunately likes to go for her paces, so my husband and I regularly have the opportunity to get outside; if only to exercise our pooch.